



Between Vermont and Violence: Film Portraits of Vietnam Veterans

Julian Smith

Film Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 4. (Summer, 1973), pp. 10-17.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197322%2926%3A4%3C10%3ABVAVFP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Between Vermont and Violence: Film Portraits of Vietnam Veterans

"When Johnny Comes Marching Home" is not only the title of a popular Civil War song; it is a symbol and a situation. It is a symbol with curiously ambivalent meanings. It signifies the return of heroes, of wars ended, of happy reunions after hard won but glorious victories, and of peace after battle. It is also a sign of dissension, of nervous uncertainty lest, in truth, we have not prepared a "land fit for heroes."

—Franklin Fearing, "Warriors Return: Normal or Neurotic?" *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1945.

In the controversial play *Sticks and Bones*, a blind veteran of Vietnam is turned over to his family by a sergeant who travels about the country delivering the sightless, the helpless, and the mindless in exchange for receipts. David, our hero, eventually proves so embarrassing and inconvenient to his all-American family (Ozzie and Harriet, his mom and dad, and Rick, his kid brother) that they talk him into killing himself in the living room. CBS has backed away from airing Joseph Papp's television version of the play—nor does *Sticks and Bones* seem Hollywood's meat. Indeed, the two dozen or so veterans I have noticed on the screen seem more inclined to kill than to be killed.

Surveying the film treatment of veterans at the end of World War II in the very first issue of this journal, Fearing, a professor of psychology, concluded that "the meanings with which we clothe the bare facts of demobilization will reveal our basic conceptions of the war itself and the reasons for which it was fought." That thesis seems valid today, for the majority of films about veterans of Vietnam present them as violent drifters, brutalized and threatening figures reflecting (if not created by) unconscious attitudes

toward the war and the men who fought it.

To put it another way: Vietnam has produced a large body of young men who practiced or witnessed at first hand the sanctioned and pragmatic use of violence—not surprisingly, film and television writers and producers have assumed the mass audience will accept the portrayal of veterans as constantly violent, given to hand-grenade fraggings in hotel elevators and (does life ever imitate art) sniping from rooftops.

Recently, Murray Polner prefaced *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran* with the observation that "Unlike the returning servicemen of earlier wars, they have not been celebrated in film or song; there are no more victory parades." Polner is only partly correct—there *have* been close to twenty films about veterans, but in no sense has the homecoming been an occasion for celluloid celebration. If anything, Johnny's return has been unsung and unnoted at best and at worst a catalyst for violence.

For any viewer old enough to remember the sensitive films about the homecomings following World War II, the shabbiness of the current crop is particularly striking. Our involvement in Vietnam has been three or four times longer than that in World War II, yet Vietnam has not

This article grows out of research for a longer and broader study of the Vietnam war's impact on the American film. Having surveyed reviews in the *New York Times*, *Film Facts*, *Variety*, and the extensive clipping files at Lincoln Center, I believe that I have located almost every significant film about Vietnam veterans. I would, however, appreciate hearing from readers who know of other films that should have been included. Julian Smith, Woodman Barn, Packers Falls Road, Durham, N.H. 03824.

The war
brought
home:
veterans
as
"honorary
Vietcong":
WELCOME
HOME,
SOLDIER
BOYS



produced a single film with a chance of aspiring to the heights of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which won seven Academy Awards in 1946—nor has even one of the score of Vietnam films come close to the kind of commercial and popular appeal represented by the Oscar, that much maligned but indicative measure of what the film industry proclaims to respect. Significantly, the only film about a veteran to be similarly honored during the decade—more of Vietnam, *The Subject Was Roses*, is about the homecoming of a soldier in the mid-forties.

World War II, to say the least, was a great popular success—a conflict that had, as Andrew Sarris observed recently, something for everyone: “Hitler and Fascism for the Bolshies, slant-eyed Japs for the racists, a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor for the patriots, gas chambers for the humanitarians, and gifted phrase-makers at the helm in London and Washington.” The universal appeal is still there, if one simply looks at *Variety*’s 1973 list of “all-time box office hits,” films with more than four million dollars in rentals. In the last decade alone, a decade that would seem to have soured us on war, the best war of our lives was represented by *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Summer of ’42*, *The Dirty*

Dozen, *The Longest Day*, *Tora Tora Tora*, *Von Ryan’s Express*, *Where Eagles Dare*, *The Great Escape*, *Kelly’s Heroes*, *In Harm’s Way*, *The Battle of the Bulge*, and, of course, *Patton*.

Unlike Vietnam, World War II brought us together, largely silencing the kind of internal conflicts that tended to surface during Vietnam. As the popular arts of the forties supported our soldiers, the tensions of war and return were not as disruptive as they might have been. After World War II, films about veterans gave occasion for reflecting upon the healing values of our domestic and civic institutions. Thus, the major films about veterans in those years tended to present extreme handicaps—an amputee (*The Best Years of Our Lives*), a paraplegic (*The Men*), and blindness (*The Pride of the Marines*). With the exception of the just-released *The POW* (about a paralyzed veteran held prisoner to his wheelchair), Vietnam has not yet inspired films about physically disabled men, perhaps because the psychic wounds have been deep enough (and because the returned soldiers have needed all their strength for striking back at a society that is depicted as having betrayed them).

Today’s celluloid veteran finds that the folks

at home—when he has a home—don't understand him, and that civic authorities, merchants, and employers are indifferent, corrupt, or both. In short, today's films about veterans reflect the moral isolation of the soldier—an isolation created in part by Hollywood's reluctance to provide the kind of patriotic and emotional support given to earlier wars.

Though United States involvement had been growing since the early sixties, the first cinematic veterans did not return until 1968, when "Johnny" Taylor, a would-be actor, came back from Vietnam armed with a film script given him by a grateful Hollywood writer just before he died. Trying to parlay the script into an acting role for himself, Johnny gets involved in various absurd adventures, including the rescue of a fair maiden from a Nazi-suited motorcycle gang. So much for a film that promised in its title, *The Angry Breed*, to delineate a whole generation of the disillusioned.

That same year another hero came back in *Angels from Hell*, an American International release, to start up his own motorcycle gang. Using his combat experience to outmaneuver rivals, contemptuous of the "Establishment" that sent him to war, defiant of all authority, this youth died in the shootout that ends an ominous number of the later veteran films.

Then came *The Big Bounce* in 1969, the first and one of the few returned soldier films to be released by a major studio (Warners). In his first feature film, Ryan O'Neal played a drifting survivor of Vietnam who gets involved in pointlessly sordid scrapes rather than going home to the conventional mom-and-apple-pie rewards of past wars, past films. Still a migratory worker at the end, heading nowhere from nowhere, he receives the disgusted tribute of a upraised middle finger from the girl who might have given his life a direction, albeit a criminal one.

1970 saw the veteran-as-motorcyclist gimmick escalated into *The Losers*, in which two vets return to Indochina as part of an ultra-violent five man team who ride their Hondas into the ultimate rumble: against the Vietcong. They all die

in gory slow motion in order to rescue a civilian presidential advisor who, in a grotesque parody of all high-handed "Establishment" ingratitude, denounces them as trash.

The Losers was a low-budget exploitation film seemingly meant for a particularly specialized audience of the disenchanted—not just veterans, but all those who have gotten the short end of the stick and take bitter solace in extreme representations of their plight. But 1970 also supplied an exploitation film for the more privileged disenchanted. *Getting Straight* tried to give them a hero in Harry, the graduate student played by Elliot Gould. I hesitate, however, to give more than passing reference to this film, for having been to Vietnam was just part of Harry's contemporary credentials.

Indeed, it is often hard to say whether some of these films are about veterans as veterans, or whether their status is simply part of a larger problem. In the recent *Journey Through Rosebud*, for example, a white draft resister is played off against an Indian veteran of Vietnam. Frustrated and made cynical by his contacts with white America, Frank, the Indian, did not stop his fellow soldiers from committing atrocities—it was not, after all, his country's honor at stake. As with black veterans in other films, Frank's racial and social isolation has been made more ironic and intense by his experience in the Nam, so the film exploits his identity as a veteran.

In addition to *Journey Through Rosebud*, 1971/1972 produced no less than a dozen films about veterans, only two of which (God be thanked) were motorcycle gang sagas. The first of these, *The Hard Ride*, is so maudlin I won't bother summarizing the plot except to say the coffins of two former Vietnam buddies, one white and one black, are guarded at the end by their common ally, an Indian biker named Big Red. More interesting in its possibilities is *Chrome and Hot Leather*, about four Green Berets who set out to revenge a girl killed in an auto accident caused by a motorcycle gang. Disguised as bikers, they track down and trap the gang in a canyon, then capture them with mortars and tear gas.



CHROME AND HOT LEATHER

Could it be that *Chrome and Hot Leather* was meant to be a socially useful film, suggesting as it does an acceptable outlet for lethal skills learned in war? Yet another employable Green Beret was *Slaughter's* titular hero, played by Jim Brown. Returning home to find his parents murdered, Captain Slaughter goes to work for an unspecified federal agency that allows him to use his military expertise to destroy the enemies of his parents and country. (Black homecomings seem particularly unlucky—the hero of *The Bus is Coming* returns to investigate the murder of his brother.)

Where Green Beret Slaughter continued the war on a personal level, the half-Indian hero of *Billy Jack* uses his Green Beret experience and training to work for peace. Here, for once, is a film that finds part of the solution right in the problem, a film that harnesses violence in support of peace and brotherhood. Part of its great box-office success and growing status as a cult film is based on Billy Jack's appealing mixture of Christ-like attributes and readiness for physical combat.

A less successful attempt to turn the man who has suffered through Vietnam into a traditional sacrificial figure is about a youth named Jud Carney (J. C. incarnate?). Set at Christmas time, *Jud* employs such lines as "Jud, if you don't want to be crucified, don't stay around crosses." Tortured by the memory of having killed a child

in Vietnam, Jud drifts aimlessly, unable or unwilling to help others, putting his few remaining emotional reserves into savage fights and denunciations of the society he defended.

As I point out in a long article in the Winter 1973 issue of *The Journal of Popular Film*, Hollywood has looked away from Vietnam. Perhaps the most obvious reasons for the scarcity of films actually set in Vietnam or dealing directly with our involvement there are that the war has been unpopular and its issues politically, morally, and emotionally unclear, and that television has satisfied the home audience's curiosity about what the war looks like.

Apart from Joseph Mankiewicz's *The Quiet American* (1957), made years before our active open involvement began, the only major American fiction film set in Vietnam is John Wayne's *The Green Berets*. Most of the films about veterans I have listed so far were directed, produced, and acted by relative newcomers outside the major studios. But as the war wound down, and as the veterans and their problems have accumulated, more established figures in the American film industry have begun to look at the war in terms of its effect on the men who fought it and, through them, on the home front.

In short, the veteran supplies a safe peg on which to hang a relevant story, and spares the

BILLY JACK



film-maker the necessity of going on location in Vietnam or trying to recreate it on a back lot. Increasingly, major directors, actors, writers, and studios have gotten involved in films about the war through the simple expedient of bringing the war home. Let us take a close look at four of these films.

First, there is *The Old Man's Place* (also known as *Glory Boy*), written by Stanford Whitmore, who scripted one of the best antiwar films to come out of the Korean conflict. Conceived, ironically, on the eve of our first escalation in Vietnam, *War Hunt* (1962) is about a psychopathic soldier who can't stop killing when the fighting stops. Thus, it foreshadows the current crop of films about men who can't turn off their lethal skills once they return stateside. When told to come back from a demilitarized zone because "the war is over," the psychopathic hero cries out prophetically, "Which war?"

So with *The Old Man's Place*, in which a much-decorated sergeant, between tours of duty in Vietnam, inappropriately extends the kind of activity for which he was honored into the civilian realm. Top billing in the film goes to Arthur Kennedy as the father of a gentle veteran. Having sent his son off to Vietnam believing war is a John Wayne movie come to life, the "old man" represents the generation that remembers World War II with fondness. The film begins to get heavy in its allegory when the old man calls on one of his cronies, the local sheriff. While the latter blasts away at clay pigeons, keeping his marksmanship in shape for appropriate civilian use, the old man makes allowances for recent violence out at his place by reminding the sheriff of their own problems in adjusting to peace following *their* war. After assorted beatings and rape, the film ends with veterans young and old blasting each other to death, thus rather easily resolving the issues raised by the notion that Vietnam is the love child of America's affair with World War II.

The old-soldier gambit of *The Old Man's Place* surfaces in Elia Kazan's *The Visitors* as well. Harry, a middle-aged writer whose fondest memories seem to be of killing Japanese in



SLAUGHTER

the Pacific, is immediately attracted to two young Vietnam veterans who come to visit his despised son-in-law, a former buddy who turned them in for raping and murdering a Vietnamese girl. As did the makers of *The Old Man's Place*, Kazan very quickly and almost too easily links fondness for World War II with acceptance of current atrocities (one remembers Audie Murphy's "I-might-have-done-the-same-thing-myself" defense of Lt. Calley was immediately picked up by the press).

Andrew Sarris was enraged by both these films: "The writers in question all need Vietnam as an excuse to make audiences look at malignant mediocrities they would never tolerate in a peacetime aesthetic. Suddenly we are deluged with the World War Two-veteran-father-fetchit figures as if every generation since time immemorial had not been afflicted with old, old soldiers who refused to fade away."

True, both films share a rape and revenge conclusion, but I would like to do a bit of special pleading for a more careful consideration of Kazan's film. Several things about it strike me as unique. For one, it is the only film about Vietnam by a major director. Secondly, because

Kazan is established and has his choice of projects, he did not need to risk his reputation with a topic almost immediately doomed to critical and financial disaster, yet he did. Thirdly, and most important, Kazan's film is almost casual in its delineation of Vietnam's effect: though the visitors were sent to Leavenworth for raping and killing a girl, they are now out of prison, released without any plot justification. They are not even particularly frightening figures—they watch football on television with Harry, shoot a neighbor's dog as a favor to him, beat up his son-in-law (who starts the fight), rape his daughter, and go their way. In today's perspective it is all very casual, everyday, and realistic, unlike the majority of the returned veteran stories that build to violent and generally *fatal* climaxes. No one gets seriously hurt in *The Visitors*, for it is not a film that takes refuge in the kind of extreme catharsis or violent resolution audiences have been trained to expect.

More than any other film-maker who has ap-

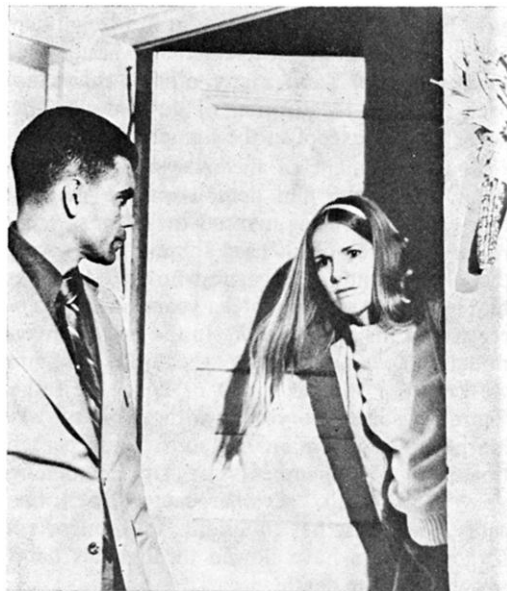
proached Vietnam, Kazan has brought the war *home*, made it a family affair. His son wrote the script, Kazan financed it with his own money, and shot it at his own country home in Connecticut. The very fact that *The Visitors* is set in Connecticut brings it home in another sense, for almost all of the veteran films are set in the Southwest, with about a dozen in California.

Which brings us to *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys*, perhaps the most extreme of the homecomings. Structured (à la *The Grapes of Wrath*) as a journey from an Army separation center in Arkansas toward the promised land of California, this film follows the pilgrimage of four buddies, all members of a Green Beret fire-team, toward a dream ranch that doesn't exist. The soldier boys of the title are the diversified combat team encountered in so many conventional war movies: the Sergeant, an old-timer; his silent, hawklike Sidekick; the Fat Guy who supplies comic relief; and the Kid, the youngest, smallest, and most expressive.

But what is a conventional combat team doing travelling across the Southwest in a funeral director's Cadillac loaded to the fins with grenades, rifles, rocket launchers, machine guns, and ammunition? The answer comes when, after being misunderstood, rejected, cheated, and persecuted, a little psychological accident leads them to wipe out the population of Hope, New Mexico (a real town, grateful to the film-makers for buying up and burning abandoned and run down property). At the end, Hopeless, they put on their uniforms to face the National Guard troops who come in to destroy them, but not before they have a chance to shoot down an Army helicopter, something our boys haven't gotten to do in the Nam. In other words, they have become honorary Vietcong.

Though *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys*, a reverse *Easy Rider*, resembles the many low-budget motorcycle pictures that characterized the early stages of the returned soldier genre, it is the product of a major studio, Twentieth Century-Fox. Released in mid or late 1972, it marks the growing willingness on the part of the "re-

Elia Kazan's *THE VISITORS*



sponsible" portion of the industry to exploit and examine the violent repercussions of the war.

Finally, there is another ironic homecoming in a film that seems to have been made for television, *Welcome Home, Johnny Bristol*. With the most impressive cast of any of the films devoted to Vietnam veterans (Martin Landau, Jane Alexander, Brock Peters, Forrest Tucker, Martin Sheen, and Pat O'Brien) *Johnny Bristol* more closely resembles the kind of affirmative "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" story that followed World War II than does any other film I have discussed here. The reason for this is simple: by concerning itself with an escaped POW, *Welcome Home Johnny Bristol* has found an emotional strategy that by-passes the diverse issues raised by the war.

As I suspect the return of our POW's may unleash a small flood of nonviolent films, both good and bad, intelligent and melodramatic, I think we might note how *Johnny Bristol* anticipates this one topic which can bring us together.* There has been no clear military victory in Vietnam and great divisions remain concerning the morality of the war—but the return of the prisoners is an occasion for something approaching national agreement and relief.

The film opens with Captain Johnny Bristol (Martin Landau) in a bamboo cage, a prisoner of the Vietcong. Only one thing sustains him: his memory of a happy childhood in a picture-book New England village. Prompted by another prisoner, a man without pleasant memories of home, Johnny repeats his stories, thus justifying nostalgic flashbacks to the town minister delivering a speech on peace and tolerance at the Fourth of July celebration in the town square.

**The POW* (1973), mentioned earlier, is about a metaphorical prisoner, a man trapped by the crippling wound he received in Vietnam. Another "POW" is the character played by Peter Fonda in *Two People* (1973): an Army deserter returning from foreign exile to face imprisonment at home.

Rescued by a helicopter raid, Johnny Bristol returns "home" by slow stages. First he must recover from wounds and malnutrition in an Army hospital full of men who have not yet made it home—including a World War II veteran (Forrest Tucker) who has been there for a quarter of a century. When he is finally released in the company of a nurse, Bristol heads for his home town. As he nears his destination, he says to the nurse "Everything good that ever happened to me happened here, in Charles, Vermont." But Charles, Vermont (the combination of words will be repeated no less frequently than "Rosebud" in *Citizen Kane*) is not where he remembered it. Moreover, there is no record of any town with that name.

From that point, the film becomes Bristol's reluctant search for the truth about his own past. Eventually he learns that his memories of a Grandma Moses America are fantasies, that his true home is a run-down Philadelphia neighborhood at the intersection of Charles and Vermont Streets, and that the brutal murder of his parents when he was a child had left him emotionally homeless. Charles, Vermont, is the creation of a man whose real memories would have been of no comfort to him in foreign captivity. In other words, Vietnam has forced Johnny Bristol (and many other Americans) back into the idealization of an America that never existed except in the imagination.

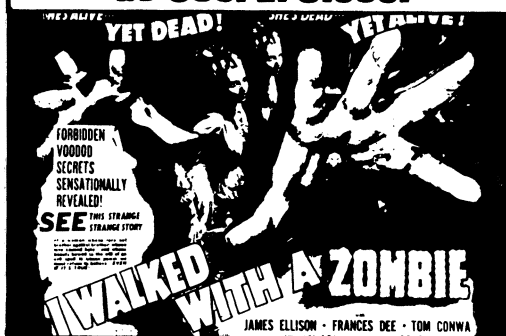
In its treatment of the character played by Pat O'Brien, the film demolishes the patriotic type-casting that has marked the actor's screen roles. In search of his past, Johnny tracks down the old recruiting sergeant who had inducted him into the Army seventeen years earlier. "You remember me, don't you?" In the more conventional film, we would expect the kindly old figure we know so well as priest or coach or father figure to solve everything with a bit of wise blarney. But Vietnam has soured our perceptions: "Do I remember you? Do I remember you? No, I don't," says Sergeant O'Brien, then sadly confesses that thousands of faceless and forgotten boys have flowed through his hands toward war and death.

As in most of the other returned veteran sagas or melodramas, the war in Vietnam is never an issue in *Welcome Home, Johnny Bistol*. We see morally neutral action scenes set there, we see the name on a map, we hear the word "Vietnam" once or twice on the sound track—but Vietnam's effect is pervasive. Johnny comes home to find the water and air poisoned, to find assassins walking the land—no wonder he begins to suspect that the Army or the government is hiding the truth about what they have done with his home. Vietnam, then, is a kind of hallucinatory drug that makes him invent an ideal America; but it is also a truth serum which forces him to see through the false ideal.

Were my purpose didactic, I would proclaim that although it has a happy ending (Johnny accepts reality and goes off to marry his nurse) and other traits of the garden-variety melodrama, *Welcome Home, Johnny Bistol* is a step toward the kind of film that welcomes veterans back into our society rather than presenting them as threatening figures to be feared and rejected.

While I was writing this article and despairing of finding a stopping point, Mark Robson's newest film came to town. Directed by the man who gave us *The Home of the Brave* and *The Valley of the Dolls*, this story of three women whose husbands are either missing or imprisoned in Vietnam seems an almost anachronistic return to the standard World War II homefront soap opera. Yet, its title alone sums up the condition of the Vietnam veteran as seen in our films to date: *Limbo*. Neither in the Hell of Indochina or the Paradise that home was once said to be, the Vietnam veteran is somewhere in between.

Father of Cat People VAL LEWTON The Reality of Terror by Joel E. Siegel



Cat People. The Body Snatcher. I Walked with a Zombie. Isle of the Dead. Misleading names for subtle psychological studies made by the master of the horror film, Val Lewton. Now the master lives again in this book of his notes and letters plus the testimony of his story collaborators—compiled by a member of the *Film Heritage* editorial board and written in tribute to the man who inspired some of filmdom's minor classics.

A Cinema One Book

Illustrated

cloth \$6.95; paper \$2.75

For a free brochure describing all of Viking's film books write:

THE VIKING PRESS

Dept. ATE-FQ

625 Madison Avenue New York, N.Y. 10022